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Using student dialogue sheets to inspire teaching

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Abstract

The student dialogue sheet method was developed at Sheffield-Hallam and used at University of Roehampton to improve assessment. Aberystwyth University (AU) has extended this method to facilitate workshops in which staff engage with student responses to the Technology-Enhanced Learning Survey. The workshops provide a collegial environment for staff to develop strategies for enhancing teaching.

The student dialogue sheet method is an evidence-based approach to educational development that helps staff engage with emerging needs. It can inspire teaching excellence and is especially suited to contexts where students require more flexible learning options.

Keywords: Pedagogy, development, student voice, UKPSF, TEL (technology-enhanced learning)

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Overview

In 2010 and 2013, the E-learning Team at Aberystwyth University ran a technology-enhanced learning student survey (Aberystwyth University E-learning Team, 2010). Our aim was to uncover current student practices and identify ways in which academic and support staff can help students learn. To this end, we decided to structure it as a learner experience (LEX) survey, rather than a satisfaction survey such as the National Student Survey (NSS).

The survey was open to all enrolled students, including undergraduates and postgraduates. We had a small proportion of responses from distance learners, as well. In 2010, we ran two parallel versions of the survey, one for enrolled students and one for prospective students, who were approached during Open Days and also by mailings via Hobsons. In 2013, we decided to concentrate only on enrolled students, so we ran a single version of the survey. It was promoted through Blackboard, through email announcements to students, and via the Student Union website. We surveyed 364 current students in 2013. In 2010, we surveyed:

- 233 Prospective students
- 445 Current on-campus students
- 28 Current distance learning students

In the survey, we asked students, “What helps you learn?” We asked what tools students have access to, how they use them for learning, how their tutors use technology to help students learn, and what recommendations students have for their tutors. We also used the VARK (visual / aural / reading-writing / kinaesthetic) model to find out about student learning preferences (Fleming, 2014). While we do not necessarily adhere to any particular model of ‘learning styles’, we have found that the VARK model can generate useful information for enhancing the learning of all students.

All sections of the survey had plentiful opportunities for students to answer free-text questions. The responses to the free-text questions, in particular, included many useful

insights but the issue was how to get staff to take action to enhance student learning. We hoped to inspire excellence in teaching through engagement with student feedback. In 2014, we used the student dialogue sheet method to engage staff with the results. This was inspired by projects carried out at Sheffield-Hallam (Oxley & Flint, 2008 and 2008a) and at Roehampton (Hall & Peat, 2013) as presented at the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) conference in November 2013 (Hall, Middlemas, & Peat, 2013). Roehampton used the method to redesign their assessments to accommodate students from diverse backgrounds, as part of a widening participation programme. Sheffield used the method to engage with NSS results, and Canning (2011) also provides a model dialogue sheet for use with NSS results inspired by the Flint (2010) model. The process involves having staff and students sit down together around a large sheet of paper that has student feedback comments on it and discuss actions that can be taken in response to the comments.

We noticed that the types of student comments we received on our survey fit nicely with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) (Higher Education Academy, 2011), so we wanted to make those connections explicit. We decided to highlight the UKPSF in the dialogue sheets themselves by mapping each comment or comment cluster against the most relevant item from the UKPSF. During the dialogue sheet sessions, we addressed this issue explicitly in the second half of the session by pointing out the areas of linkage. Staff were provided with a printed copy of the UKPSF. Our aims were to raise awareness and encourage staff to apply for Fellow status in the Higher Education Academy (HEA), but most importantly, to recognise that the feedback from students fit neatly into the structure of the UKPSF. Responding to our specific student feedback is a way of engaging with the same principles promoted through the framework.

Aberystwyth University has recently been reorganised into an institute model. There are 16 departments clustered into six institutes. We adapted the dialogue sheet method for use with our own survey and carried out sessions for each institute or department in our university. Our first step was to analyse the free-text responses to identify the headlining messages. Some of the student responses were similar to those found in free-text responses to other surveys, such as the NSS and the Aberystwyth University

Information Services User Survey, while others provided new information. The free-text questions in the other surveys asked students very general questions, while our LEX survey was much more in-depth, asking for specific information about many different aspects of students' experience in learning with technology. We wanted to highlight the full range of responses, showing how the LEX survey reinforces and extends the results gained from the other surveys.

Once we identified the most representative comments across the most common areas, the E-learning Team designed a draft dialogue sheet and then consulted with the Student Union Education Officer to see how these messages tallied with other sources of feedback from the student representatives. Together, we chose seven clusters of comments or sets of data.

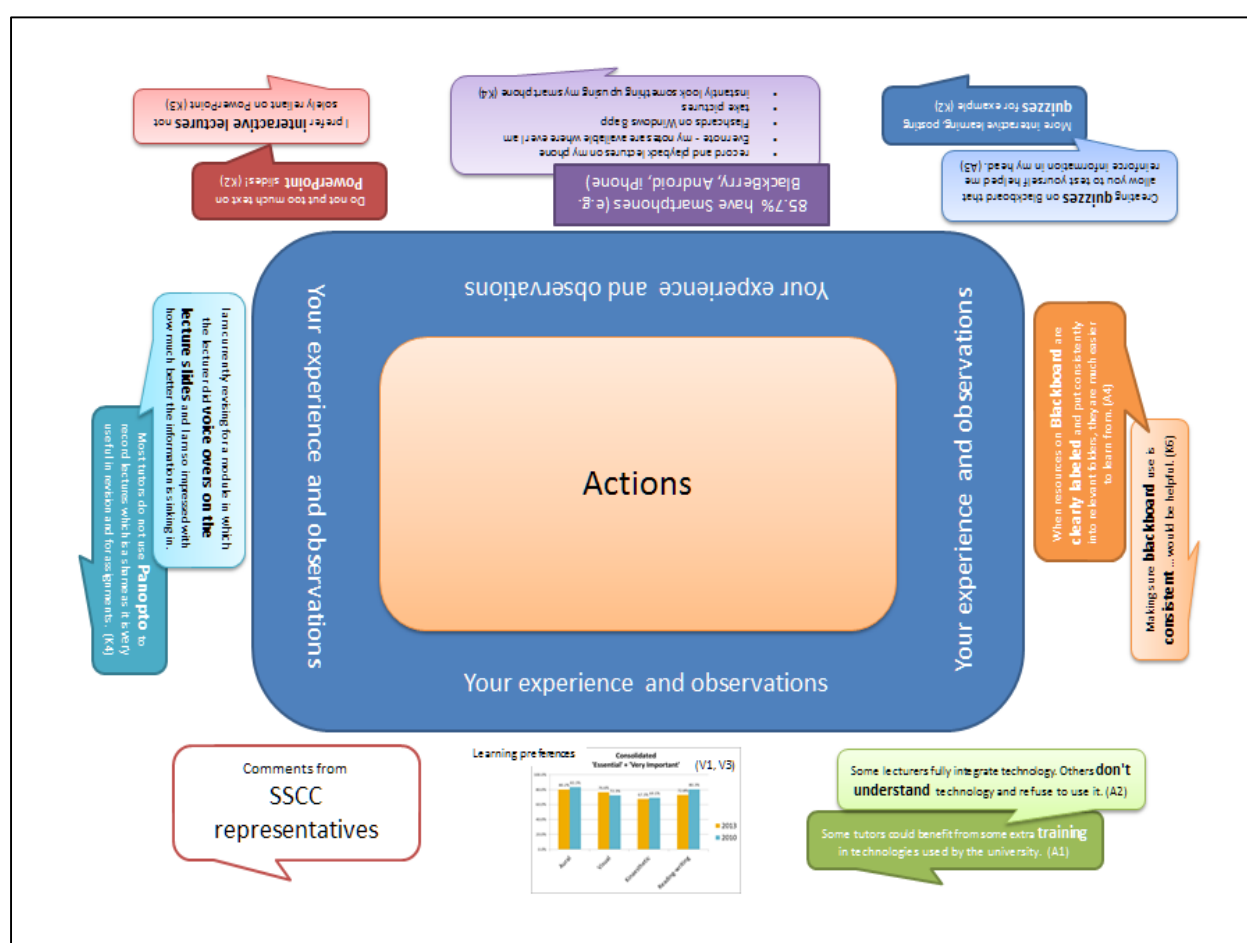
There are a number of approaches to creating dialogue sheets – one large sheet can be used, covering the entire table-top, or individual A4 pages can be arranged on the table. We chose to design single sheets to be printed on A0 paper. The seven clusters of comments were placed around the edges of the sheet, leaving one space available for department- or institute-specific feedback from the department or institute's student representative. We mapped the most relevant UKPSF items onto each comment or cluster. There was an area in the centre of each sheet for staff and students to post actions, and a ring around the centre area for them to post observations and notes about their own experiences. The topics covered were:

- **Learning preferences** – most students felt that all four modes (hearing, seeing, reading/writing and doing) are either 'essential' or 'very important' when learning a new academic subject
- **Staff training in technology-enhanced learning** – students noted a variance among staff who are proficient and those who still need training
- **Consistent use of Blackboard across modules** – students want to find materials in Blackboard easily
- **Quizzes** – students felt that use of quizzes, whether online (via Blackboard) or during lecture (via the Qwizdom voting system) helps students learn

- **Mobile device usage** – most students have a smart phone and use their mobile devices in many different ways to learn
- **Lectures** – students want interactive lectures and do not want text-heavy PowerPoint presentations
- **Lecture capture** – students find lecture capture with Panopto useful for revising

The dialogue sheet is depicted below.

Figure 1. AU Dialogue Sheet



Based on the results of the survey, the E-learning Team has concluded that several actions would be useful. Both institutionally and within the team, we have decided to implement a range of provisions to help staff use technology effectively for student learning.

Our initiatives include:

- Promoting and embedding a multi-modal teaching approach in our own training sessions
- Pro-actively contacting departments and institutes to hold yearly AberLearn Blackboard training sessions for staff
- Designing a Blackboard required minimum presence, and extending it in with a new guideline for enhanced presence in 2014-15
- Carrying out a training programme and competition known as the Aberystwyth University Exemplary Course Award, based on Blackboard's Exemplary Course Programme, to raise awareness of good practice in online learning design
- Holding training sessions to encourage the use of Qwizdom and the Blackboard test tool for formative assessment
- As part of the Making More Mobile project, acquiring licences for Qwizdom Virtual Remote so that staff can use Qwizdom with student's own devices
- Embedding information about student mobile device usage into our consultations with staff
- Delivering a training session on effective use of PowerPoint for the Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PGCTHE) programme and at our Learning and Teaching Conference as well as in our training programme
- Striving to embed good practice in our own PowerPoint presentations by using visual elements effectively and combining interactivity with content delivery
- Promoting the use of lecture capture through an institution-driven, university-wide policy

The activities listed above all involve messages about good practice coming from the centre to teaching staff. We felt we needed to complement this with a more participant-driven approach to staff engagement. The key factor in our dialogue sheet activity is that instead of telling staff what we think they should do, we created a platform for staff to explore and find their own solutions and actions. This opened up the scope for approaches that are participant-driven, that build a community of practice, and that

encourage and stimulate creative responses. Therefore, in the dialogue sheet sessions, the E-learning Team staff held back from expressing prescriptive views.

How it works

The method for facilitating the sessions is described in detail [here](#).

Figure 2. Staff using a Dialogue Sheet



To carry out a student dialogue sheet session, we put the sheet in the middle of a table, with 6-8 people sitting around it. Each table was provided with post-it notes as well as a copy of the UKPSF. With larger groups, we had several tables work in parallel. Student representatives were invited to bring comments specific to their department or institute, ideally having one student sit at each table. We found that students tended not to bring a formal A4 sheet to put onto the table, but rather rough notes. Students shared their comments verbally and wrote them on post-its. The aim of the activity was for participants to generate actions that they can do in response to the student feedback. Participants took turns reading out the comment, quote or statistic in front of them. A

discussion ensued about that topic for five minutes before moving on to the next participant.

Members of the E-learning Team served as facilitator and scribe. The facilitator introduced the activity and then acted as time-keeper, signalling when the groups move on to the next comment. The facilitator also provided a one-minute warning if needed, calling for the action items. The scribe took notes, which were written up, shared among the participants, and then compiled into a report for the Technology-Enhanced Learning Group. A key element in this process is that the facilitator and scribe did not sit at the table with the lecturers and students, and they did not intervene in the dialogue. The dialogue must take place among teaching staff and students, not between the E-learning Team and the staff.

During the conversation, anyone can jot down ideas on post-it notes for:

- Possible actions to be taken by teaching staff, putting the note into the central area, **Actions**;
- How the item resonates with their experience and observation, putting the note onto the ring area, **Your Experience and Observations**.

At the end of the table discussion, each table reported to the whole group on its actions. The scribe made note of these and collected the post-its.

Below is a plan showing what the participants, facilitator, and scribe did at each phase of the Aberystwyth sessions.

Table 1. Outline of a Dialogue Sheet session

Participants	Facilitator	Scribe / Observer
	Arrange tables, put out dialogue sheets, post-its, pens, copies of UKPSF	
	Introduction and welcome Explain how the session will run – actions are 'What can teaching staff/departments/university do?' Explain the notation for UKPFS	
Each table works on the first item for 5 minutes	Timekeeping, signal when to move to next item Project the current question being discussed via document camera	Monitor discussion and take notes but don't participate (this is crucial)
Tables progress through 8 items, generating actions on post-its to put into centre of table If fewer than 8 people, one person can take two items	Timekeeping Keep an eye from a distance to make sure they stay on topic, but don't participate in the discussion (this is crucial) Explain learning preference stats (we had four survey questions: When learning a new academic subject, how important is it for you to hear it explained/see it depicted visually/have a go at doing something/read about it?)	Monitor discussion and take notes but don't participate (this is crucial)
Whole-group discussion, each table shares the action items	Facilitate the group discussion Clarify any areas of confusion about e-learning provision	Collect post-its Take notes, focussing on actions
	Thank participants, remind them that the report with their comments will go to the Technology-Enhanced Learning Group	
	Write a short report distilling the action items and send it to participants to make sure it accurately reflects their input Collate results for the Aberystwyth University Technology-enhanced Learning Group	

Reflections

General reflections

The activity generated comments that were useful for our own practice in e-learning support as well as useful for the teaching staff. We gained a better understanding of the issues that staff and students face. There was quite a lot of variation among the groups. We noticed a divergent pattern in which some groups tended towards full engagement and openness to generating actions, while some others included what appeared to be a pre-existing resistance to any change in teaching practice. This pattern has been observed in other contexts, such as participation in the PGCTHE. Even in groups that included some resistance, however, we observed at least some of the group members generating ideas for ways in which they could respond to the student feedback by changing their practice.

In cases when participants expressed concern about their ability to act in response to the topics on the sheet, the biggest obstacles they mentioned were staff time and resources.

Role of the Students

The presence of students is essential to the success of the activity, and had a positive effect on the group dynamic. The students often validated the comments and elaborated on student experience in that particular department. For example, one student said that the department's Blackboard modules have been more consistent in the past two years than previously, so current practice is on track. In another session, the student described in more detail how students are using their mobile devices for learning, which surprised some of the staff, who weren't familiar with the apps mentioned.

We have found that staff are often quite keen to hear from students. There is value in having the students and staff participate as equals – this is a true case of working with students as partners. Here are some quotes from the students who participated:

Although I get to interact with staff on a collegiate level at student-staff consultative committees, this was the first instance where I got to work with staff and actually felt like their equal.

I really liked how valued my contributions were by lecturers: I'm looking forward to seeing the changes we worked together on suggesting becoming reality.

I think sessions like this, on a variety of topics, need to happen more often. I now feel much closer to my department and felt like staff really cared about my opinion.

Role of the Facilitator

The facilitator refrained from speaking during the first part of the session, which can be difficult, as there can be a temptation to correct any misconceptions straightaway. However, it is more effective to allow the teaching staff to correct each other. It is very persuasive when academic staff hear their peers say that a method is useful and feasible to implement, rather than having the same message come from a non-teaching staff member. The facilitator and scribe listened in and took notes on points to clarify in the second part of the activity. In many cases, the table self-organised with someone who prompted the group for actions and sometimes another who wrote the actions down. If the topic wandered, the facilitator prompted the group to generate actions via a one-minute warning.

In the second half of the session, the facilitator either sat at the table with the participants or facilitated from the front of the room, depending on the number of tables. The aim was to collect actions and clarify anything that isn't clear from the post-it notes. At this point, the facilitator can also explain about technology-enhanced learning provision and clear up any misconceptions. Staff in some sessions were well-focussed on generating actions, but in other sessions, the post-its tended to be about side issues rather than actions. This variation seems to depend on the group dynamic and departmental culture as well as the particular combination of people in the group.

Role of the Scribe / Observer

The scribe's role was primarily to observe and take notes for writing up the report later. The scribe sometimes joined in the second part of the session, as appropriate. We felt it was important that anyone wishing to facilitate should first observe a session to understand how it is meant to run, so scribing and observing a session also served as a training activity in the dialogue sheet method, enabling the scribe to facilitate a subsequent session.

Role of the Teaching Staff Participants

The teaching staff were the primary beneficiaries of the exercise. The aim was to enable them to identify things that they can implement in response to student comments. It was interesting to observe how the dynamic among participants varied. The presence of innovators and exemplary teachers tended to have a positive impact on the dynamic and generate a large number of actions that staff can take in response to the student comments. In some cases, staff seemed reluctant to generate actions such as getting training, but we also saw an emerging community of practice in which lecturers learn from and help each other. This is something we would like to promote further in other activities.

Next steps

We were happy with the timing and structure of the session and will continue to use this format. We found that five minutes was about right for a focussed discussion of each topic, as there is time in the second half to discuss things in more depth if needed.

There were a few items on the sheet that needed verbal explanation, so in future we will revise the sheet to clarify them directly on the sheet. We focussed on results from our own survey, but many of the same messages also come through various channels. Next time, it would be useful to more explicitly reference data from other surveys, such as our university's Information Services user survey and NSS comments. For example, consistency in use of Blackboard or other Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is

common across the UK, as Jessica Poettcker, Student Engagement Consultant for the National Union of Students (NUS), emphasised at the Blackboard Teaching and Learning Conference in 2013 (Poettcker, 2013).

In addition to the department-specific sessions, we are holding sessions independent of any institute or department, to give all staff an equal chance to participate and further promote cross-discipline sharing. The two most important outcomes of the sessions were that we observed staff empowering each other to try new things and overcome fear of technology, and that students were treated as full partners in the exercise. We believe that a more consistent approach to the use of technology-enhanced learning will be a natural outcome of the discussions at each table, and that this type of activity can serve as a change agent for enhancement. Staff were inspired by their peers and by their students to innovate and enrich their teaching. It is our hope to enable others to use this method for their own enhancement activities.

As a further outgrowth of the dialogue sheet activity as well as longer-term discussions and a separately-funded project known as the Cadarn Learning Portal, Aberystwyth University has recently launched the Aber Academy. Funding from the Cadarn Learning Portal as well as internal sources enabled Aberystwyth to refurbish a suite of rooms for use as a media lab and recording studio as well as e-learning training room. Media equipment such as cameras, camcorders, and microphones were acquired for staff use. The E-learning Team is currently being trained in using the new equipment and software, so that we can train academic staff in creating educational resources.

This is a major action on the part of the university to enrich the student experience by addressing the expressed desire for more visual and interactive learning identified by students responding to the survey. It is our desire that this project will help alleviate the issues of staff time and resources, thus lowering the barriers to using media-rich methods of learning and teaching.

The Aber Academy (<http://nexus.aber.ac.uk/xwiki/bin/view/Main/Aber+Academy>) will also serve as a platform for developing the community of practice further via the Academy Forum, a group of staff and students who come together to discuss good

practice in learning and teaching. We plan to offer student dialogue sheet sessions as an activity for Forum participants. This phase of the initiative was launched on 11th July 2014, and has been well-received so far. We look forward to strengthening our community of practice over the course of the next year.

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